

**Cleansing the Unclean (אָמֵט) for Mission: Empowering a Man of Unclean Lips to Minister to a People with Unclean Lips –
*An Interpretation of Is. 6: 1-13 and its Implications for Today's Politics and the Anti-Corruption Drive in Nigeria***

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ABSTRACT

In a political dispensation where almost everybody appears to be part and parcel of the woes of government and tends to be influenced by its 'unclean standards,' it can be very difficult to make steady progress in responsible governance especially in the anti-corruption war. This has been a problem and proposes to degenerate into worse experiences in many developing countries like Nigeria, if it is not checked today. The search for a 'worthy Minister' in Church or in State is difficult to conclude. Where, then, lies the future of ministry and political service if no 'good person' can be found? This work, in response to the above question, seeks to give direction invoking the provisions of Religion. Employing the Historical Methods of Exegesis to interpret Isaiah 6: 1-13, and especially analyzing the import of verse 5 where Isaiah, a man of unclean (אָמֵט) lips, was empowered to minister to a people of unclean lips, this research progresses with the assumption that just as Isaiah was cleansed and qualified to minister to the rest of his unclean people, some 'unclean politician' could also be made clean for political service to a corrupt society. The aim of this research, drawing inspiration from findings of the passage of study, is to examine and discover how this can be done and apply it to benefit today's politics. The conclusions and recommendations are very relevant and promise to benefit not only politics in general and the anti-corruption drive especially in Nigeria, but also Biblical scholarship.

Keywords: Unclean, Mission, Isaiah, Politics, Anti-Corruption Drive

INTRODUCTION

Life journey almost always presents itself with inadequacies which naturally limit expectations. In such cases, the reliance is always on the other to bounce back. This becomes very difficult where/when everybody is caught in the web. The questions abound as to who, in that situation, can help whom to forge ahead.

In today's world where politics/Government matters have naturally received unprecedented attention, it is not difficult to see the yearnings of the citizenry to sanitize politics and government of its present inadequacies. The anti-corruption drive of the Nigerian Government, for example, is a step in this direction. The hope has always been that when/if politics and Government are put aright, all other matters relating to the individual and the society would also take shape. This seems to be a mirage in many places for example in Nigeria. Every successive administration coming-in and claiming to be fighting this war ends up directly or indirectly being caught-up in this web of corruption. Who then can be saved and who then can save? Many have lost faith in the process of restoring sanity to our land. This has created a big problem for politics and even for religion as people lose faith in the ability of the acclaimed 'messiahs' to deliver and the status quo would unfortunately lead to more indulgence in the corruption web.

In an attempt to restore hope and renew the zeal for possible re-bounce to prominence irrespective of prevalent ‘general contamination,’ the Biblical example of Prophet Isaiah in Is 6: 1-13 comes to mind as a mirror of hope for the resurgence of a deprived people – Israel.

Generally, the people of Old Testament Israel had been chosen by God to be the official bearers of God’s loving plan to other nations (cf. Is 42: 1-6; 45: 8 etc), They fell short of the demands of this status because of their sinfulness. When Prophet Isaiah experienced the holiness of God in Is. 6: 1-13, and squared it against his personal inadequacies and the general sinfulness of the people of Israel, he doubted the possibility of being able to minister on behalf of such a holy God in the midst of such unholy people. He exclaimed in Is. 6: 5: “I am a man of unclean lips and I live among a people of unclean lips...” The rest of the story details how this ‘man of unclean lips’ was cleansed by God. But the entire book of Isaiah remains silent (at least of explicit mention) about the fate of the ‘people of unclean lips.’ The ‘educated guess’ is that the cleansing of Isaiah - the ‘man of unclean lips’ in Is. 6:5, was in view of the cleansing of Israel - ‘the people with unclean lips.’ This research work “Cleansing the Unclean (אָנְטִי) for Mission: Empowering a Man of Unclean Lips to Minister to a People with Unclean Lips – *An Interpretation of Is. 6: 1-13 and its Implications for Today’s Politics and the Anti-Corruption Drive in Nigeria*” is an attempt to find hope in a desperate situation. The aim of this research is, therefore, to interpret, examine and analyze the import of the cleansing of Isaiah in Is 6: 1-13; and to serve the needs of politics and government today by projecting the theological implications of Isaiah’s cleansing (and his consequent mandate to minister to Israel) as a mirror and an exemplar of possible restoration of hope for a depraved people through the agency of one person. This work intends to answer the question: can we assume that just as one man of unclean lips was cleansed and empowered to minister to a people of unclean lips, it would be possible for one person or any single administration to be empowered to serve the political needs of a nation like Nigeria? If this can ever be possible, how and when?

Using the Historical methods of exegesis to interpret Is 6: 1-13, and paying particular attention to the import of the word ‘unclean,’ we will also apply the Descriptive and Analytical methods to project the findings of such interpretation and apply its implications to serve the needs of a nation like Nigeria which is in search of cleansing and in longing for restoration. The puzzle remains: How possible, how much and how far can one man or administration be prepared (and by whom?) to serve the generality of a depraved nation?

This search for hope is very relevant in a situation where both the Church and the State are in need of restoration. Like Isaiah, our leaders are of ‘unclean lips’ and they live among ‘people of unclean lips.’ There is no doubt that they need this ‘cleansing.’ When, how, where or from whom can the empowerment come? The findings, recommendations and conclusions of this research would really serve the needs of scholarship and restore Hope and Direction to both Church and State.

EXPLICATION OF TERMS

The following words and phrases which are used contextually in this research need to be explained for better understanding. They include: Unclean (Unclean Lips; Unclean Man; and Unclean People); Mission; Prophet Isaiah; Politics and Anti-Corruption Drive.

Unclean

Apart from the fact of its occurrence as אָנְטִי in the passage Is. 6: 1-13, The word ‘unclean’ is used in this research as an adjective in a very broad sense to accommodate nuances like sinful, unholy, corrupt, depraved, unfit as they refer to man. Whether the word is qualifying lips or man or people, it is a reference to depraved humanity. Referring to ‘lips’ for example or to any part of the human body is only an indication of the nature and extent of deprivation. Reference to unclean man or unclean people is mainly to differentiate the situation of a single

person from that of a plurality merely to buttress the point that no single person is qualified – individual or group. Unclean brings with it the idea of non-qualification.

Mission

The word ‘Mission’ is used in this research to refer to ministry seen as a mandate. Mission is used broadly to accommodate both religious and political mandate to ministry. This research progresses with the understanding that any type of leadership should have a missionary perspective. ‘Missionary’ here is less of the commissioning for religious duties but accommodates more of the aspect of purposefulness in carrying out one’s religious or political mandate.

Prophet Isaiah

In this work, reference is made of Isaiah or Prophet Isaiah interchangeably. This refers to the works, oracles and theology of the 8th century prophet Isaiah who preached in Judah about Jerusalem.* While appreciating the nature of the book of Isaiah as scholarly divided into three (Proto-Isaiah, Deutero-Isaiah and Trito-Isaiah),† usage of Isaiah in this research dominantly references the passage of study – Is. 6: 1-13 and centers on exposing the meaning and import of the 8th century prophet Isaiah.

Politics

The use of the word politics in this research refers to anything and everything that concerns the government as ‘city-state.’ Given the context of usage, the restoration of hope and relevance to political leadership is nuanced here. In a loose but broader sense, the word politics also serves to reference the leadership needs of religious ministries like what happened to Prophet Isaiah.

Anti-Corruption Drive

Reference to the phrase “Anti-Corruption Drive” in this research is in connection to the understanding of another word ‘unclean’ as also used in this work. Just as Isaiah’s mandate in Is. 6: 1-13 included a type of ‘anti-uncleanliness’ drive, this research is concerned with an ‘anti-corruption drive’ which proposes to restore the ‘polis’ back to sanity. In a specific way, the phrase, ‘anti-corruption drive,’ has to do with the efforts of Government especially the Nigerian Government to fight corruption as a venom which robs the ‘polis’ of the needed ability to ‘minister’ to others as originally intended. This is the war against corruption going on in many places.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

This topic “Cleansing the Unclean (ⲁⲛⲛⲉ) for Mission: Empowering a Man of Unclean Lips to Minister to a People with Unclean Lips – *An Interpretation of Is. 6: 1-13 and its Implications for Today’s Politics and the Anti-Corruption Drive in Nigeria*” enjoys the pride of combining three major areas in one research. The first is the interpretation of Is. 6: 1-13 as cleansing the unclean for Mission. The second is the understanding of that interpretation as “a man of unclean lips ministering to a people with unclean lips.” The third is the application of

* For more on the person of Prophet Isaiah, see Gerald Emem Umoren, *The Salvation of the Remnant in Isaiah 11.11-12*. Florida: Dissertation.Com. 2007. Pp. 13ff.

† Gerald Emem Umoren, “Re-Reading Deutero-Isaiah’s Oracles of Salvation to the Ears of the Poor Today: A Practico-Pastoral Imperative” in *African Journal of Contextual Theology*, (Published by: Spiritan International School of Theology, Attakwu-Enugu), Vol. 5; December 2014

the findings and conclusions of the first two to benefit contemporary needs – implications for today’s Politics and the Anti-Corruption Drive in Nigeria.[‡]

There have been different types of works and articles on each of these sections. The interpretation of Is. 6: 1-13 has appeared in many Commentaries and works by renowned scholars like Barton, Blenkinsopp, Brueggemann, Childs, Clement, Kaiser, Oswalt, Seitz, Watts and Wildberger.[§]

They all expose, and rightly so, the theological import of the oracles of Isaiah at different stages of his call and ministry. This general ‘interpretation’ is reduced to ‘understanding’ and this is attested to in scholarship by different authors who seek to appreciate the fruits of the interpretation like Driver, Key, Knierim, Liebreich, Love and Whitley.^{**} There is wide acceptance from scholars that Isaiah 6: 1-13 records the call of a young prophet to the difficult task of ministering to a difficult people. The empowerment of one man of unclean lips to minister to a people of unclean lips is understood merely by many of these scholars as part of Isaiah’s overall call to prophecy. The uniqueness of this research is in opening up another perspective and being disposed to explore a new dimension of seeing the cleansing of Isaiah mainly as a preparation to minister to Israel. In this case, the mission of Israel and the mission to Israel necessitated the cleansing of Isaiah.

On the third note, the hermeneutical appreciation of Is. 6: 1-13 and its application to contemporary situations may have been attested to by a few scholars like Allen Rose who applies it to the desired experience of religious ministers today,^{††} but the application of this text to politics and government and especially to the anti-corruption drive of the Nigerian government is a novelty that commands the relevance of this research.

The above review of related literature confirms that, though there are works related to this topic in general, the specifics are too generalized to address the wide range covered by this research. This research strives to fill that gap. Apart from the fact that there is likely no previous work that has interpreted Is. 6: 1-13 for the application benefits of Nigerian politics and the anti-corruption drive, this research remains a pioneering effort in the combination of Exegesis, Biblical theology and Hermeneutics of Isaiah’s call for the benefits of politics in general and Nigeria in politics. It is actually in this understanding that the relevance of our research lies.

[‡] There is clearly a combination of three theological disciplines in this one research. Interpretation in the first instance is a reference to Exegesis. Understanding in the second instance, references Biblical Theology while the application in the third instance references Hermeneutics. It is, therefore, unique that these three theological disciplines are brought together in one research work

[§] John Barton, *Isaiah 1-39, OTG*, Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1995, pp. 1ff; Joseph, Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 1-19*, AB 19, Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 2000, pp.6ff. ; Walter, Brueggemann, *Isaiah 1-39*, Westminster Bible Companion, Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1998, pp. 3ff.; Brevard S. Childs, *Isaiah*, OTL, Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001, pp. 1ff; R. E. Clements, *Isaiah 1-39*, NCB, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980, pp. 18ff.; O. Kaiser, *Isaiah 1-12: A Commentary*, Translated by R. A. Wilson. Philadelphia: Westminster, 1972, pp. 2ff; John N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah*, Chapters 1-30, NICOT, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986, pp. 1ff.; Christopher R. Seitz, *Isaiah 1-39*, Interpretation. Louisville: John Knox, 1993, pp. 7ff.; John D. W. Watts, *Isaiah 1-33*. WBC 24. Waco, Texas: Word, 1985, pp. 2ff; H. Wildberger, *Isaiah 1-12*. Translated by Thomas H. Trapp. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991, pp. 4ff

^{**} G. R., Driver, “Isaiah 6: 1, ‘His Train filled the Temple’” in Near Eastern Studies in Honour of William Foxwell Albright. Edited by Hans Goedicke. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, pp. 87-96; Andrew F. Key, “The Magical background of Isaiah 6: 9-13” JBL 86 (a967): 198-204; Rolf Knierim. “The Vocation of Isaiah” VT 18 (1968):47-68; Leon J. Liebreich, “The Position of Chapter Six in the Book of Isaiah” HUCA 25 (1954): 37-40; Julian Price Love, “The Call of Isaiah: An Exposition of Isaiah 6” Interpretation 11 (1957): 282-296; C. F. Whiteley, “The Call and Mission of Isaiah” INES 18 (1959):38-48

^{††} Allen Rose, “How the Sovereign Lord God prepares His servant Isaiah (6: 1-13)” in The Book of Isaiah, published on Bible.org on 5th August 2004 and accessed from www.bible.org on 1st May 2018

EXEGESIS OF IS 6: 1-13

In order to do an objective exegesis of this passage, this research will progress through detailed analysis of the text to its interpretation. Below is the text presented in Hebrew, Greek and English.

Isaiah 6: 1-13 in Hebrew

בַּשְּׁנַת־מוֹת הַמַּלְאָךְ עֲנִיָּהוּ וַאֲרָאָה אֶת־אֲדֹנָי יֹשֵׁב עַל־כִּסֵּא רָם וְנִשְׂא וְשִׁוְיוֹ מְלֵאִים אֶת־הַהֵיכָל׃
 2 שְׁרָפִים עֹמְדִים מִמַּעַל לּוֹ שֵׁשׁ כַּנְּפִים שֵׁשׁ כַּנְּפִים לְאַחַד בְּשַׁתַּיִם׃ יְכֹסֶה רַגְלָיו וּבְשָׁתַיִם יַעֲוֹפֶף׃
 3 וַקְרָא זֶה אֶל־זֶה וְאָמַר קְדוֹשׁ קְדוֹשׁ קְדוֹשׁ׃ יְהוָה צְבָאוֹת מְלֵא כֹל־הָאָרֶץ כְּבוֹד׃
 4 וַיִּגְעֹו אַמּוֹת הַסָּפִים מִקּוֹל הַקּוֹרְא וְהַבַּיִת יִמְלֵא עָשָׁן׃
 5 וְאָמַר אֲוִי־לִי כִי־נִדְמִיתִי כִּי אִישׁ טְמֵא־שִׁפְתַיִם אֲנִי וּבְתוֹךְ עַם־טְמֵא שִׁפְתַיִם אֲנִי יוֹשֵׁב כִּי אֶת־הַמַּלְאָךְ יְהוָה צְבָאוֹת רָאוּ עֵינָי׃
 6 וַיַּעַף אֵלַי אֶחָד מִן־הַשְּׁרָפִים וּבִיָּדוֹ רִצְפָה בְּמַלְקָחִים לָקַח מֵעַל הַמִּזְבֵּחַ׃
 7 וַיִּגַּע עַל־פִּי וַיֹּאמֶר הִנֵּה נִגַּע זֶה עַל־שִׁפְתֹתַי וְכָרַ עֲוֹנוֹתַי וְחַטָּאתַי תִּכַּפֵּר׃
 8 וַאֲשַׁמְעֵ אֶת־קוֹל אֲדֹנָי אֲמַר אֶת־מִי אֲשַׁלַּח וּמִי יִלְךְ־לִנְנֹו וְאָמַר הֲנִי שְׁלֹחְנִי׃
 9 וַיֹּאמֶר לִּי וְאָמַרְתָּ לָעָם הַזֶּה שְׁמַעוּ שְׁמוּעוּ וְאַל־תִּבְיִנוּ וְרָאוּ רָאוּ וְאַל־תִּדְעוּ׃
 10 הַשְׁמֹן לִב־הַעָם הַזֶּה וְאֲזַנֵּיו הִכְבַּד וְעֵינָיו הִשְׁעוּ פְּנֵי־רְאֵה בְעֵינָיו וּבְאֲזַנָּיו יִשְׁמַע וּלְבָבוֹ יִכְבֹּו וְיִשָּׁב וְרַפָּא לּוֹ׃
 11 וְאָמַר עַד־מָתַי אֲדֹנָי וַיֹּאמֶר עַד אֲשֶׁר אִם־שָׂאוּ עָרִים מֵאֵין יוֹשֵׁב וּבָתַיִם מֵאֵין אֲנִים וְהִאֲדָמָה תִּשְׁאַף שְׁמָמָה׃
 12 וְרַחֵם יְהוָה אֶת־הָאֲדָמָה וְרַבָּה הָעֲזוּבָה בְּקִרְבִּי הָאָרֶץ׃
 13 וְעוֹד בָּהּ עֲשֻׂרָהּ וְשָׁבָה וְהִיְתָה לְבַעַר כְּאֵלֶּה וְכֵאלֹוֹן אֲשֶׁר בְּשַׁלְכֹת מַצְבַּת בָּם יַרְע קִדָּשׁ מִצְבָּתָהּ׃

Isaiah 6: 1-13 in Greek

καὶ ἐγένετο τοῦ ἐνιαυτοῦ οὗ ἀπέθανεν Οζίας ὁ βασιλεὺς εἶδον τὸν κύριον καθήμενον ἐπὶ θρόνου ὑψηλοῦ καὶ ἐπηρμένον καὶ πλήρης ὁ οἶκος τῆς δόξης αὐτοῦ
 2 καὶ Σεραφιν εἰστήκεισαν κύκλω αὐτοῦ ἐξ πτέρυγες τῶ ἐνὶ καὶ ἐξ πτέρυγες τῶ ἐνὶ καὶ ταῖς μὲν δυσὶν κατεκάλυπτον τὸ πρόσωπον καὶ ταῖς δυσὶν κατεκάλυπτον τοὺς πόδας καὶ ταῖς δυσὶν ἐπέταντο
 3 καὶ ἐκέκραγον ἕτερος πρὸς τὸν ἕτερον καὶ ἔλεγον ἅγιος ἅγιος ἅγιος κύριος σαβαωθ πλήρης πᾶσα ἡ γῆ τῆς δόξης αὐτοῦ
 4 καὶ ἐπήρθη τὸ ὑπέρθυρον ἀπὸ τῆς φωνῆς ἧς ἐκέκραγον καὶ ὁ οἶκος ἐπλήσθη καπνοῦ
 5 καὶ εἶπα ὦ τάλας ἐγὼ ὅτι κατανένυγμαί ὅτι ἄνθρωπος ὢν καὶ ἀκάθαρτα χεῖλη ἔχων ἐν μέσῳ λαοῦ ἀκάθαρτα χεῖλη ἔχοντος ἐγὼ οἰκῶ καὶ τὸν βασιλέα κύριον σαβαωθ εἶδον τοῖς ὀφθαλμοῖς μου
 6 καὶ ἀπεστάλη πρὸς με ἐν τῶν σεραφιν καὶ ἐν τῇ χειρὶ εἶχεν ἄνθρακα ὃν τῇ λαβίδι ἔλαβεν ἀπὸ τοῦ θυσιαστηρίου
 7 καὶ ἤψατο τοῦ στόματός μου καὶ εἶπεν ἰδοὺ ἦψατο τοῦτο τῶν χειλέων σου καὶ ἀφελεῖ τὰς ἀνομίας σου καὶ τὰς ἀμαρτίας σου περικαθαριεῖ
 8 καὶ ἤκουσα τῆς φωνῆς κυρίου λέγοντος τίνα ἀποστείλω καὶ τίς πορεύσεται πρὸς τὸν λαὸν τοῦτον καὶ εἶπα ἰδοὺ εἰμι ἐγὼ ἀπόστειλόν με
 9 καὶ εἶπεν πορεύθητι καὶ εἶπὸν τῶ λαῷ τούτῳ ἀκοῆ ἀκούσετε καὶ οὐ μὴ συνῆτε καὶ βλέποντες βλέπετε καὶ οὐ μὴ ἴδητε
 10 ἐπαχύνθη γὰρ ἡ καρδία τοῦ λαοῦ τούτου καὶ τοῖς ὠσὶν αὐτῶν βαρέως ἤκουσαν καὶ τοὺς ὀφθαλμοὺς αὐτῶν ἐκάμμυσαν μήποτε ἴδωσιν τοῖς ὀφθαλμοῖς καὶ τοῖς ὠσὶν ἀκούσωσιν καὶ τῇ καρδίᾳ συνῶσιν καὶ ἐπιστρέψωσιν καὶ ἰάσομαι αὐτούς
 11 καὶ εἶπα ἕως πότε κύριε καὶ εἶπεν ἕως ἂν ἐρημωθῶσιν πόλεις παρὰ τὸ μὴ κατοικεῖσθαι καὶ οἴκοι παρὰ τὸ μὴ εἶναι ἀνθρώπους καὶ ἡ γῆ καταλειφθήσεται ἔρημος
 12 καὶ μετὰ ταῦτα μακρυνεῖ ὁ θεὸς τοὺς ἀνθρώπους καὶ οἱ καταλειφθέντες πληθυνθήσονται ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς
 13 καὶ ἔτι ἐπ' αὐτῆς ἔστιν τὸ ἐπιδέκατον καὶ πάλιν ἔσται εἰς προνομήν ὡς τερέβινθος καὶ ὡς βάλανος ὅταν ἐκπέσῃ ἀπὸ τῆς θήκης αὐτῆς

Isaiah 6: 1-13 in English

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple.

2 Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew.

3 And one called to another and said: "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory."

4 The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke.

5 And I said: "Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!"

6 Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs.

7 The seraph touched my mouth with it and said: "Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out."

8 Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" And I said, "Here am I; send me!"

9 And he said, "Go and say to this people: 'Keep listening, but do not comprehend; keep looking, but do not understand.'

10 Make the mind of this people dull, and stop their ears, and shut their eyes, so that they may not look with their eyes, and listen with their ears, and comprehend with their minds, and turn and be healed."

11 Then I said, "How long, O Lord?" And he said: "Until cities lie waste without inhabitant, and houses without people, and the land is utterly desolate;

12 until the LORD sends everyone far away, and vast is the emptiness in the midst of the land.

13 Even if a tenth part remain in it, it will be burned again, like a terebinth or an oak whose stump remains standing when it is felled."1 The holy seed is its stump.

Analysis of the Text

An objective analysis of this text promises to reveal its true interpretation. First of all, the textual analysis does not reveal any serious controversy. The authenticity of this passage in itself is so much presumed that scholars only talk about the placement of the passage and never the content.^{‡‡}

The background of this Chapter is the fact of a prophet's vocation, which was conventionally a public experience. The Remote background is the vocation of an Old Testament prophet. The proximate background is the call and empowerment of the 8th century prophet Isaiah in the setting of the Jerusalem temple. "This chapter is a fully self-contained unit, presented as the first person report by the prophet of what happened to him, what he saw and heard and what he said."^{§§}

Regarding the structure of this passage, scholars are not very unanimous here. While some scholars favour a double structure based on the unit-sense of Temple account (Is 6: 1-8; and 9-13),^{***} others favour a tripartite structure of vision (Is 6: 1-4); preparation (Is 6: 5-8) and

^{‡‡} Cf. John N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah 1-39*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986, p. 172. See also Gene M. Tucker, *The Book of Isaiah 1-39* in The New Interpreter's Bible, Vol. VI, edited by Leander Keck, Nashville: Abingdon, 2001, p. 101.

^{§§} Gene M. Tucker, *The Book of Isaiah 1-39* in The New Interpreter's Bible, Vol. VI, edited by Leander Keck, Nashville: Abingdon, 2001, p. 102

^{***} John N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah 1-39*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986, pp. 170 ff.

commission (Is. 6: 9-13).^{†††} This research prefers a harmonized structure based on and separated by the import of the word ‘unclean’ טָמֵא and the overall action of cleansing. In this case, there would be this tripartite structure:^{‡‡‡}

A = The experience of God by Isaiah (vv. 1-4)

B = Isaiah’s response and Divine intervention (vv. 5 – 8)

C = Isaiah’s commission to unto ministry (vv. 9-13)

The above three structures represent Isaiah’s call to servant-hood. The centrality of the second structure is very revealing. That corpus has antecedents in verses 1-4 and precedents in verses 9-13 as seen below.

And I said: "Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!" Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. The seraph touched my mouth with it and said: "Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out." Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" And I said, "Here am I; send me!" (cf. Is. 6: 5-8)

The literary genre is a combination of poem, poetry and narrative stories which serves to make an interesting reading of the passage. Sometimes, it presents itself as a single unit. The meaning is better grasped and appreciated and this aids interpretation. A formal analysis of a few words in the passage could throw more light on the overall meaning of the passage. Every section has one or more of these terms and the overall appreciation would aid eventual interpretation. Apart from the appreciation of the theological import of words like ‘Lord,’ ‘King,’ ‘Seraphim,’ ‘Temple,’ etc., some of the key theological words that must be understood include: ‘Holy’ (qadosh), ‘Glory’ (kabod), ‘Unclean’ (tame), ‘Guilt’ (awon) and ‘Expiate’ (kipper). A contextual reading of the passage with attention to these words, reveals that in the entire passage, “the revelation of the glory and holiness of the Lord are basic to the cleansing and the call of the prophet.”^{§§§} In section A, the exalted Lord is most holy and enthroned on high. In Section B, the vision of this transcendent God convicts the prophet of his inadequacies. The key word here is (tame) ‘unclean’ to which this research will return in detail. God’s intervention is consequent upon man’s confession and Isaiah is cleansed and made ready for mission. In section C, the prophet, having been empowered, is able to respond and is commissioned for ministry to his people of unclean lips. All these sections and Formal analyses help to situate this passage in the context of empowerment for mission to a people.

Cleansing the Unclean (טָמֵא) Isaiah for Ministry

The direction of this research very much depends on the interpretation of this second section of the passage especially the import of the word unclean טָמֵא and what it takes to cleanse this man of unclean lips in Is. 6: 5ff. The word טָמֵא comes from the Temple Liturgy and is very common in the setting of Leviticus. The primary understanding of being ‘unclean’ is not sin as commission of wrongdoing. It connotes ethical and religious defilement.^{****} The default in טָמֵא is more elaborate as it connotes a situation of grave derailment from the ordinary. Unclean here could mean ‘off limits,’ ‘out of bounds,’ “unacceptable in the presence of God because of

^{†††} Gene M. Tucker, The Book of Isaiah 1-39 in The New Interpreter’s Bible, Vol. VI, edited by Leander Keck, Nashville: Abingdon, 2001, p. 102 ff

^{‡‡‡} This is more or less the structure adopted by many scholars. However, the focus, which will determine the independent clause is different. This research is highlighting the fact of the cleansing of the unclean for the benefit of other unclean.

^{§§§} Allen Rose, “How the Sovereign Lord God prepares His servant Isaiah (6: 1-13)” in The Book of Isaiah, published on Bible.org on 5th August 2004 and accessed from www.bible.org on 1st May 2018

^{****} טָמֵא in BDB Hebrew Lexicon accessed electronically from Bible Works, 9

physical, earthly nature and contaminations.”^{††††} But if the reference is to ritual purity, was Isaiah really ritually impure? This does not seem likely because the setting of this theophany is in the Temple area and if Isaiah were ritually impure, he would first of all not have been able to come close to the Temple area to experience this theophany. The insight we may want to explore here as far as the possible understanding of ‘unclean’ in this context is concerned, is the fact that the reference is to ‘lips.’ This is significant because apart from the fact that the theophany in section A (Is. 6: 1-4) demanded a faithful of ‘clean lips’ to join in the song of holiness and praise by the Angels, as a prophet, Isaiah was to be initiated into the ‘responsibility of the lips.’ As a messenger of God, he was to be a user of the lips. The same ‘lips’ are used metaphorically to show that Isaiah was not fit for the responsibility he saw before him – not only because he was contaminated himself (out of the limits of holiness) but also because the people with whom he lived and to whom he was to minister were contaminated, too. The import of ‘unclean’ here is what would define the need for and the type of the cleansing. In both situations (Isaiah’s and that of the people) there is a reference to this word ‘lips.’ This research strongly holds that the reference to lips in a situation where Isaiah does not seem to be ritually contaminated leaves the type of impurity here to suggest something like ‘responsibility misfit.’ The word נֶפֶשׁ in this context, does not mean resistance or inadequacy.^{‡‡‡‡} “At this point, the prophet becomes aware of himself. He has been aware of the desperate need implicit in the political situation.”^{§§§§} Most likely, this word means that Isaiah, from the nature of the theophany, was aware of his inadequacies given the expectation of the prophetic responsibility and expressed his fear in confession of sin and mourning.^{*****} The divine standard of glory and holiness was very high for Isaiah and so he confessed his limits and implicitly cried out for help. The divine response to this confession is the cleansing in verses 6 to 7. It must be noted that after the cleansing, the prophet is solemnly pronounced to be free from ‘sin and guilt.’ Surely that signaled the end of the effects of any uncleanness, impurity and any inadequacies. However, a puzzle still remains for there were two ‘sides of the coin.’ The man was of unclean lips and the people were of unclean lips too. Here the man is purified and made clean but nothing is said about the people. This suggests that Isaiah has been set apart not only from the people but for the people. He is cleansed so that he would become an instrument of cleansing for the people. This analysis of Section B makes way for the appreciation of Section C as the actual commission of the prophet to take up a difficult task of ministering to his people of unclean lips. After his cleansing in Section B, Isaiah was bold to respond affirmatively in readiness for mission. The former ‘man of unclean lips’ who is now cleansed is ready to minister to his people of unclean lips. The prophetic message of Is. 6: 9-13 may sound very pessimistic but the theology cannot but be a sarcastic call to repentance or face impending doom. Such calls go more with the desire and wish for conversion than the desire or wish for hard-heartedness and subsequent judgment. The provision of Is. 6: 13 which leaves the possibility of a ‘remnant’ highlights the element of hope in this difficult message.

^{††††} Allen Rose, “How the Sovereign Lord God prepares His servant Isaiah (6: 1-13)” in The Book of Isaiah, published on Bible.org on 5th August 2004 and accessed from www.bible.org on 1st May 2018

^{‡‡‡‡} Gene M. Tucker, The Book of Isaiah 1-39 in The New Interpreter’s Bible, Vol. VI, edited by Leander Keck, Nashville: Abingdon, 2001, p. 103 ff

^{§§§§} John N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah 1-39*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986, p. 182.

^{*****} See Gene M. Tucker, The Book of Isaiah 1-39 in The New Interpreter’s Bible, Vol. VI, edited by Leander Keck, Nashville: Abingdon, 2001, p. 103.

Interpretation of the Text

Is. 6: 1-13 is a block that addresses many situations in ministry. Branick sees it as describing “Isaiah’s vision of God, his prophetic call and his mission.”^{††††} As Oswalt puts it, “it is an intentional arrangement of Isaiah’s twin messages of certain doom and certain salvation.”^{†††††} From the analyses above, It is clear here that prophet Isaiah may already have started his ministry before he had this experience or before he decided to record this experience as a justification of his cause. The superlative experience of God’s holiness and glory exposed the ‘nakedness’ of Isaiah as a prophet. He confessed that he was unclean and that meant that he needed cleansing. This research has determined that the use of (נָפֵץ) ‘unclean’ here connotes general inadequacies in ability to measure up to ministerial expectation. This awareness created a consuming fear that only God himself could take away. The type of uncleanness and the nature of the needed cleansing, all necessitated some divine intervention. The uncleanness was that of the lips and therefore the cleansing had to be that of the lips. But the fact that only Isaiah is cleansed means that God empowered one man to be the instrument of empowerment for the others. The fact of confession is very important here. The difficult message that Section C proposes for Isaiah is to be understood as an invitation to him to elicit repentance and confession of sin by the people of unclean lips so that he (Isaiah) would truly be the agent of cleansing for the people of unclean lips. This is why Isaiah is seen as a ‘servant of God.’ According to Tucker, “the sequence of events leading up to this point is important. There had been the encounter with the presence of God, confession, a ritual of purification, overhearing the Lord, addressing the heavenly council, and then, acceptance of the commission.... The one purified by the divine messenger is able to hear the call and accept the commission to go as God’s representative, to take the place of the angels...” One of the most prominent interpretations of Is. 6: 1-13 is that against the background of his experience of the theophany, Isaiah, who confessed his uncleanness of lips and living among a people of unclean lips, was cleansed by God through an agent in a symbolic intervention that is to be understood as setting Isaiah part from and for the people of unclean lips. It must be noted that the question by Isaiah in verse 11 “How long O Lord?” is a clear case of pity and consequent intercession for the people. Isaiah had already understood his role as the one to cleanse the people since he himself has been cleansed. As God’s agent of ministry to others, Isaiah is therefore called to be an instrument of cleansing for the land and people because no matter the level of judgment preached, salvation is always the final word for God. Even the fact of the remnant in verse 13 guarantees hope.

THE CHALLENGES AND DEMANDS OF CONTEMPORARY MISSION

Having already understood Mission here to entail mandate to minister religiously or politically to people, this research is looking at the challenges and demands of such missions today – in religious and political circles. In the Christian Church today, the standard is Jesus Christ. Leadership in the Church would therefore demand a considerable level of morality. But the real situation is that even when everybody understands the need to uphold the desired moral rectitude, it is easy to get contaminated by the ‘uncleanness’ of the time. While the Church remains a divine institution, the human aspect of it still leaves the Church falling short of the divine standard established by the Lord and Master. Like in the time of Isaiah, it is possible to have the Church ministers with unclean lips like Isaiah fellowshiping with people of unclean lips like the Israelites. The challenges here would be on the desired growth in faith. As the Scripture even says: ‘when a blind man leads another blind man, they fall into a pit’ Cf. Luke

^{††††} Vincent P. Branick, *Understanding the Prophets and their Books*, New York: Paulist, 2012, p. 74.

^{†††††} John N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah 1-39*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986, p. 173

6: 49. The experience is the perpetration of wrongdoing and the lack of confidence in the system. It affects the faith and would demand some intervention.

On the other hand, looking at mission from the political circle, there are also a lot of challenges and demands. The most prominent and most relevant of these challenges is the recycled nature of ‘irresponsibility in government.’ Looking at governance as a type of mission, one can see that many of our political leaders are of unclean lips like Isaiah and are working with people of unclean lips like the Israelites. The challenge in Nigeria, for example, is that while everybody appreciates the unrivaled status of Nigeria as ‘the giant’ of Africa,^{§§§§§} the culture of corruption and irresponsibility has eaten so deep into the system. Like Israel of Isaiah’s time, Nigeria is marked for leadership but the experience is that successive governments keep promising better days but are not able to deliver on them. A typical and very relevant situation is the fight against corruption by successive Nigerian government especially the Buhari-led administration of 2015 till date.^{*****} At a time when everybody thought they were succeeding, fresh revelations on security and religious lopsidedness have almost confirmed that it is the same ball game. This challenge of insincerity and increased corruption has created a worse situation of despair and greater doubts about the future. It is difficult to trust any other politician or government of the day coming to preach political wellbeing or claiming to fight corruption. It is as if every other person is a ‘man of unclean lips living among a people of unclean lips’ The challenging question is: Is there any hope for the future of political ministry in a place like Nigeria?

INVOKING THE PROVISIONS OF IS. 6: 1-13 FOR TODAY’S MINISTERIAL GAINS

This research, having analyzed the theological import of Is. 6: 1-13 is able to confirm that its provisions can be invoked for the benefit of today’s religious but especially political mission challenged with lack of hope and credibility stemming from increased irresponsibility and corruption. Just as Isaiah was a man of unclean lips and lived among a people of unclean lips, Religious and Political leaders today are of unclean lips and they live among a people of unclean lips. The findings from the interpretation of the text of Is 6: 1-13 show that it is possible to be empowered unto renewed vigor in a depraved and deprived situation. Appreciating the fact that all Israel (Isaiah and the people) were of unclean lips before God cleansed Isaiah; and appreciating the fact that Isaiah turned around to minister to his people, it is then safe to say that, where necessary conditions are fulfilled, there is always some hope as the cleansing of one person is enough to generate an agency for the empowerment of the others. Just as Isaiah alone became an agent of transformation for Israel, it could be possible to raise up one point of leadership contact for Nigeria provided the relevant stages that led to the cleansing of Isaiah are made possible. It must be remembered that Isaiah confessed his sins and disposed himself for cleansing. It must be remembered that in the heart of a difficult message, Isaiah showed concern for his people by asking “How long O Lord?” It must be remembered that the message of judgment of Isaiah to Israel was actually the motivation for renewed fidelity which at least left a remnant. All these could be invoked for the benefit of ministerial gains today.

^{§§§§§} Nigeria is not only the most thickly populated nation in Africa, it also has a and mass that covers a considerably large expanse. Besides, by human and mineral resources, its position as a leading nation is not contested. yet, these advantages do not seem to be adequately explored

^{*****} As part of the efforts to live up to expectation, the Buhari-led administration has publicized a lot verbally about their resolve to fight corruption. The results are, unfortunately, still yearning for adequate proofs of confirmation.

EVALUATION

The call of Isaiah as we have seen has a lot of implications for politics and especially for the Nigerian anti-corruption drive which is tending to slip into an ocean of doubts today. From the analysis of how Isaiah saw, heard and responded to the call of God; how he confessed himself as a man of unclean lips with a people of unclean lips, and how he eventually accepted the difficult task of ministry to a people of unclean lips, it is safe to project that the hope referenced by the Isaiahic situation can serve the needs of the Nigerian situation. This leaves relevant implications for politics and especially for Nigeria's Anti-corruption war.

Implications for Politics

The call of Isaiah in Is. 6: 1-13 has a lot of implications for politics. Understanding politics here to mean governance of the people, it is necessary to appreciate Isaiah, too, as a symbol of political responsibility. The findings from the interpretation of the call of Isaiah confirm that 'there can be light at the end of the tunnel.' The central implication is that just as one man of unclean lips was able to accept the responsibility over the other people of unclean lips even when hope seemed far-fetched, there is hope for the future. But in order for Isaiah's situation to make sense for politics, there are specific steps that Isaiah took which current and intending political leaders would also need to do. Isaiah was sincere and remorseful; Isaiah was disposed for the cleansing by God; Isaiah was concerned about the plight of his people. That concern formed the basis of his restoration of hope and salvation to a people originally filled with despair and judgment. If Isaiah, a lone voice, could succeed and be instrumental to the restoration of the people of Israel, contemporary political leaders must appreciate the fact that there is hope.

Implications for Nigeria's Anti-Corruption

The Anti-Corruption drive in Nigeria had enjoyed a lot of support at the beginning but experiences have brought doubt for the future. The challenge has been the loss of faith in the system as every successive governor or government, tends to grow worse instead of growing better. This is because every successive government has men and people of 'unclean lips'. The puzzle is between who/how we can draw from Is. 6: 1-13 to benefit the Anti-Corruption drive of the present Government. The focus is Isaiah's double message of judgment and salvation. Isaiah also deserved judgment because he was a man of unclean lips. But having been disposed for cleansing, through a sincere confession of guilt, he was prepared to minister to others and change their judgment to salvation. The implication is that, with the proper disposition, it is still possible for one man or one administration someday, to pioneer a renewed effort to lead Nigeria out of the corruption quagmire. The summary is still the same: There is hope!

Recommendations

In the continued attempt to apply the interpretations of Is. 6: 1-13 to the religious and political needs of the time, the following recommendations would be helpful to ensure more meaningful results:

1. Leaders should allow the transcendent holiness of God to challenge them in their responsibility. Leadership should create room for God
2. There should be belief and positive disposition for a better tomorrow. There is need for an attitudinal re-orientation to leadership. The virtue of service should be taught from the family to the school to the Church before one even contemplates political office.
3. There should be allowance for Divine intervention. Reliance should be on God's defining direction onto responsibility.
4. The quality of concern for the plight of the citizenry is very crucially needed. Every political aspirant must demonstrate readiness and willingness to serve.
5. As God's servants, all leaders must be disposed to go where God directs.

CONCLUSION

In every genuine vocation, God takes the initiative. He calls, prepares and commissions. Though Isaiah has a double side of judgment and salvation, it is only God and his divine provision that can guarantee hope in difficult situations. The experience of Isaiah in his call narrative and the import of the word נָטַף 'unclean' point to a special commission of empowerment by God for one whose cleansing signals the cleansing of the rest of the people. The message of hope that this passage professes is the guarantee for the application of the passage to the situation of things in religion, politics and governance especially the anti-corruption drive of the Nigerian government.

Isaiah's preaching was a call to repentance. He was cleansed to administer to those who were not cleansed. The Revelation of God in glory as experienced by Isaiah, was motivational, transformative and inspiring for service. This research proposes that, in all cases, especially with the despair caused by 'the men of unclean lips,' the import of hope should be invoked and applied especially in religious and political arenas. The holiness and glory of God should be allowed to be a standard of action for all religious and political leaders as this will motivate and re-inspire responsibility and the needed belief in the future. This hope proposed by Isaiah's situation must not be allowed to die for the sake of scholarship, religion and politics.

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